Mélissa Boucher Morales
Looking forward, backward

Avec le soutien aux galeries
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Mélissa Boucher Morales places photography at the heart of her practice, exploring the medium in all its materiality and sensorial dimensions. Through the use of unconventional supports and a wide range of formats, she continues her investigation into the image, questioning its production and modes of appearance. Her approach is also informed by representations of desire and intimacy. For her first solo exhibition at the gallery, the artist retraces the threads of our memories and explores the connections between photography and memory.

Conversation between Mélissa Boucher Morales and Ana Mendoza Aldana

Ana Mendoza Aldana — We have collaborated on several occasions. The first time was for the exhibition *Monstres et Madones* in Paris in 2015, followed by other exhibitions in art centres. More recently, we have been preparing a monographic publication, Display, which will bring together several series from your work spanning ten years, along with a new text. Do you think that a shared interest in the haptic, connected to attention and the sensuality of matter, forms the basis of our common ground?

Mélissa Boucher Morales — Haptic is a word I find quite beautiful. I don't use it very often, but it certainly corresponds to what I seek in my work and to what brings us together.
What interests me is this encounter between image and matter, but also the way photography can become a sensory experience. I don't think images on their own hold quite as much meaning for me. It is when they enter into a relationship with a space, a support or the viewers that they speak to me. What I am looking for is this connection between two materials, between matter and the body, between matter and space or the gaze: something pertaining to sensoriality, to what images can emanate, provoke or make us feel.
This is also what explains why I can move from one technique to another, without seeking to remain within a fixed process. The choice of support or technique comes from what I want to bring forth from the image. For instance, for all the colour treatments in *Phosphènes*, I used glossy paper for the first time. It is not a surface I would naturally turn to, apart from reflective glass, but I needed something almost liquid, a paper capable of conveying light. It was through experimenting with this surface and colour that something began to take shape. The way light moves across the paper, and the way colours seem to gain depth and fluidity, gradually gave form to this body of work.

A.M.A — Your exhibition opens with a title that invites us to reflect on the dual nature of every photographic image. For you, as for Wim Wenders, from whom you borrow the title, every photograph is both a capture of the subject being photographed and, simultaneously, a reflection of the photographer's desires. Is the notion of desire important in your work? How does this desire affect the way you approach images?

M.B.M — When reading Wenders, I was thinking of the idea of a kind of dance or parade. I like this notion of movement, from the inside outwards (from the subjective towards the objective) – and vice versa – between the photographer and the photographed subject/object. Wenders uses the example of hunting, of the recoil, the blow to the shoulder caused by the firing of a gun. There is also, in the title, the idea of the instability of memories.
It is true that reflections intertwining the construction of desire and the production of images were at the heart of a long-term project incorporating several of my photographic series (*Scrolling, Rooms, Ungazed, Illustres inconnue*s...). I think what interested and questioned me most was the element of desire generated by illusion: how visual flows and our relationship to the virtual can shape and transform our desires, much like the encounter between a material and an image can alter its interpretation and create a particular visual approach.

A.M.A — The question of memory and remembrance is essential to your work. Images survive differently when we summon them. Is this what you are pointing to with *Introspection / Phosphènes*?

M.B.M — With regard to *Looking Forward, Backward*, I am interested in the question of what triggers a memory, what allows it to persist, or makes it impossible to access. What becomes of memories that fade from our minds? I have often wondered whether they continue to exist somewhere, materially.
I began to question the mechanisms through which memories are formed and erased. Photography seemed an obvious way of extending this reflection, given its dual nature and its capacity for manipulation. The idea of matter as memory extends from that of photography as an imprint, or as the making of imprints. It is this uncertain space between inscription and disappearance that interests me.

Phosphènes emerges as a sensory experience of sameness and difference. There is this slightly blurred image that drifts, yet returns with each glance. I wanted to create something somewhat hypnotic by colourising this image, which is a black-and-white negative. This colour chart departs from Richter's objective *Colour Charts*, inspired by industrial colour charts in which all colours have equal value. Here, I started with a shade of purple associated with the colour we see (or that the brain interprets) when we close our eyes, and sought to shift the tones through the enlarger while remaining within this spectrum. It is somewhat akin to the way memories change each time we recall them.

A.M.A — In 2016, you began by photographing the shop windows occupied by sex workers in Brussels. Although you never exhibited these images, you consider them precursors to the work you would go on to develop from 2020 onwards, with *Scrolling* and *Rooms*, around cam girls and certain feminist pornographic films. These images pay particular attention to the devices used to stage a theatre of desire: the makeshift or highly professional ways in which sex workers and cam girls use lighting to illuminate their bodies, their furniture, objects, posters and the surroundings they create for themselves... Could you tell us how this attention to the devices used both to create and to display images manifests itself in your practice?

M.B.M — When I lived in Brussels, I used to walk through this neighbourhood at different times of the day, as it was on the way between my home and the train station. I remember being struck, when passing through during the daytime, by the feeling that these spaces, emptied of bodies, were nevertheless charged and evocative. There was a dual movement, both alluring and intriguing, yet unsettling: scattered glamorous or erotic objects, a difficult reality that could be glimpsed in the details, and at the same time the presence of something illusory.
All the elements of a potential mise-en-scène were there: red and blue neon lights, often switched off but still visible; elements that recur in my work, such as curtains, often closed, or sometimes open, with objects arranged around a seat. There were occasionally objects placed between the curtain and the window: combs or glossy shoes.
I began photographing these empty shop windows, or those with their curtains drawn, but it became dangerous. People started following me, and I had to stop. It was a very delicate subject. I wanted to speak to these women, but everything was much more controlled than I had imagined. They must have taken me for a journalist.
When I think about the word dispositif, what comes to mind is a way of giving images spatial depth. A coexistence and legibility within space. I think this is what interests me in the relationship to images: the idea that they should have a presence and, in a way, succeed in bringing together 2D and 3D.
With *Scrolling*, my intention was to make viewers active participants, encouraging them to search for images, reconstruct the ensembles and confront their own image as voyeurs in the reflective glass. With *Sehnsucht*, the idea is to move through the image, to create a point of contact between the viewer and the image. As for the workwear garments in *Canthus*, it is the garment itself that becomes both body and image, through the ambiguous materiality of the pieces.

A.M.A — Photography and pornography have shared a closely intertwined history since their inception. Both can preserve the trace of something concealed, and sometimes even something occult or intangible, such as the immaterial existence of spirits, sexuality or desire. Photography and pornography both play with the idea of illusion. One of the spaces you have created in your exhibition oscillates between a pole-dancing studio and a photographic laboratory. This space seems once again to confront us with our position as viewers and voyeurs, but it also suggests that we contribute to the making of the image. Would you agree?

M.B.M — There is no direct link to pornography in this body of work, although it is true that there is an erotic undertone. Initially, while thinking about the artists' workwear overalls I saw in the studio, I wanted to create garments that would function both as a kind of protective barrier and as a way of manipulating elements such as fire (indirectly, the fire of creation), light and photography... Hence my use of welding-curtain material for these garments.
Unconsciously, I started by using the red ones, and someone quickly pointed out the connection with the red safelight used in photography. I also think I like the somewhat lascivious quality of this material, which goes hand in hand with the ambiguity of photography that runs through my practice, as well as with a certain eroticism that permeates these workwear garments through the colour and texture of the material. I therefore imagined a space made up of these elements, dedicated to the making of images.

Canthus is the point where the two eyelids meet, in other words, the horizon line of our gaze. This space is dedicated to looking and, indirectly, to the eye. Both the one that creates and the one that looks through their own subjectivity. Pole dancing is the playful element: something very physical, burlesque, and a staging of desire.

A.M.A — Could you tell us a little about the process behind the *Ungazed* series? Why did you choose to work with wet-plate collodion, and what does this medium allow you to do?

M.B.M — What interests me in this series is the opportunity to reflect on the gaze through the encounter between two seemingly distant modes of image production: on the one hand, collodion, an old photographic process that is material and direct; on the other, streams of virtual images, broadcast in real time and mediated by the screen, characteristic of our contemporary relationship to images and to others.

By photographing close-ups of the eyes of women I encounter on these interfaces on analogue film, through my screen, and then transferring them to collodion, I create a shift between virtual space and photographic materiality. These gazes, initially caught up in a stream of ephemeral images, acquire a physical presence, a certain depth.

The encounter between photography and the reflective properties of certain materials, particularly glass, lies at the heart of my practice. I am especially interested in collodion on glass because of the ambiguity of the image it produces: an image that can appear either as a negative or as a positive, depending on the background against which it is viewed. This instability, between appearance, disappearance and transparency, extends my reflection on how images are perceived, on the question of the gaze and on the materiality of images.

A.M.A — In my recent research on melancholy, I have found a very clear connection between desire and memory. Melancholy arises around a void or a sense of loss, the hollow left by the disappearance of something or someone. Unlike nostalgia, which builds desire around a reconstructed and idealised memory of the absent object of desire, in the melancholic experience, the ghost – the latent absence of that object – lies at the very heart of desire. It is impossible to let go of what we desire; it is impossible to forget its absence, which continually makes itself felt... Photography, through its indexical nature, but also film, thus become privileged mediums for ghosts and melancholy. To me, your work seems to crystallise around precisely this.
What is your relationship between desire and memory?

M.B.M — I don't see how the two can be separated. I associate photography with memory and, for me, to photograph is to seek to capture, to want to show, to want to unsettle, to desire. Photography is melancholic par excellence.
I have a very poor memory. I have often wished I could remember more, but perhaps I wouldn't work the way I do if that were the case. Perhaps this very lack also fuels my practice.
Remembering is such a complex and fascinating exercise. Sometimes we would like to forget certain events, but they come back to us like a boomerang. It makes me think of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, in which the protagonists have the possibility of erasing their memories, of forgetting the love they once felt for someone. Yet, in doing so, the main character tries to disrupt the process of erasure in order to keep remembering what he is in the process of forgetting.

Biography

Ana Mendoza Aldana is a curator, art critic and poet born in Guatemala. She is a 2026 Villa Albertine resident. Her recent research focuses on melancholy, the ghosts of colonisation and the spectre of madness in the Americas. The narrative exhibitions she curates take literature as their starting point and bring queer and feminist narratives to the fore. She is co-director of La Salle de bains in Lyon and a board member of Persona Curada, a curatorial platform dedicated to contemporary Latin American art.

Mélissa Boucher Morales studied at the École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris. She has been a member of the Le Houloc artist collective since 2016. Her photographic installations employ a wide variety of formats and experimental processes, exploring the possibilities and limitations of the image, as well as its transformations. Her experimental practice, combined with her research, examines the representation of intimacy through gesture, as well as our relationship to places and memory.

Born in Paris in 1986, Mélissa Boucher Morales lives and works in Seine-Saint-Denis. She has presented several solo exhibitions, notably at Abraham & Wolff gallery in Paris (2023), the ManifestO festival in Toulouse (2019), the Multimedia Art Museum in Moscow (2017), and Le Centquatre in Paris, as part of the Circulation(s) festival (2016). Her work has also been included in several group exhibitions, notably at Les Rencontres d'Arles (2026), Le Crédac in Ivry-sur-Seine (2022), Maison des Arts in Malakoff (2022), and Galerie Jocelyn Wolff (2024).

"Upon discovering Mélissa Boucher Morales's photographic practice, one quickly realises that photography alone is insufficient to account for the remarkable plasticity of this medium. It is indeed as a visual artist that, for over a decade, she has sought to question the evolving ways in which images emerge in contemporary society, as well as the fate of intimacy in a world saturated with the circulation of images that, until quite recently, were considered personal or private. Her display arrangements therefore often extend beyond the frame, lending her prints an almost sculptural physical presence. Yet photography remains essential to her practice, since, whether printed, captured on film or digitised, it is ontologically subject to erasure and disappearance.

In a gesture inherited from Marguerite Duras, the ghostly fate of every image, whatever its technique, becomes, in the artist's work, a visual language that, from one series to the next, brings back into focus the vulnerability and inherent fragility of a medium that is becoming increasingly ubiquitous. (...)" Excerpt from a text by Benoît Lamy de La Chapelle